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**MORAL CHOICE: DETERMINISTIC, RANDOM, OR FREE WILL?**

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Are we robots, doomed to perform as programmed by society? Are we creatures of chance who shake a pair of dice in our heads and base decisions on the spots that turn up? Or are we thinking rational beings, operating in a unique and different way, making choices for which we are responsible? The author argues that choice is not deterministic or random, but that we humans have a God-given power that allows us to be the originators of choices that shape our lives. Since these are our own choices, we are responsible; we are punished or rewarded for (and by) our choices.

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**Introduction**

It is agony. My conscience is killing me. Must I confess or can I keep silence? If I reveal what I have done, the shame will be terrible. No one knows, why not let my lie remain? I want to do what is right. I want to be clear before God on the day of judgement. I want to obey His will in all things--must I obey in this too? I have told God that I am sorry--isn't that enough? Must I correct the lie as well? Do I really love the truth?

I've stolen--well not exactly--I've just made unauthorized long distance phone calls. Lots of other people did it too. The boss winks at it, he even makes a few himself. Well, yes, it is against company policy, but it was a long time ago. Won't they think less of me as a Christian if they find out that I did it too? I told God I was sorry and quit. Isn't that enough? Must I pay the money back?

These are moral decisions. How do people make such choices?

As a computer scientist, I often program computers to make decisions. I have used fairly complex conditions for some decisions and random number generators for others. No matter how complex the factors in the decision, the result is determined by given conditions. If I use a random number, the result cannot be predicted yet no one would claim that the computer had "chosen". It is even possible to use a weighted decision--the sum of outside conditions plus a random number. The result cannot be predicted but will seem to follow outside conditions, while the random term prevents a monotonous consistency. No one would say that the computer *chose*, though it might model some people's behavior.

In my computer science classes I challenge students to think about how to program a computer to have free will. Could a computer program be written that allowed the computer to decide that it *wanted* to start a war, plant a garden, raise guppies, or burn Rome? Could the computer decide that it liked people? wanted to go skiing? enjoyed watching fish? or wished to purchase modern art as an investment? I go on to discuss our free will and what it cost God to create a creature with the option to rebel. God did not want robots programmed to say, "I love You"--but rather thinking, discerning beings who could appreciate Him and choose to love Him. He valued this freedom enough that, even knowing it would cost the life of His Son, He gave it to man anyway.

Some will say that since a computer's decisions are based on comparing two numbers, that free will for computers is just not possible. Yet artificial intelligence research has shown some very surprising results--such as programs that play checkers and beat the programmer, or simulate a

psychiatrist well enough to fool people. The limitation is not with the computer but with the programmer.

It is commonly thought that if a computer ever does get free will, it must first be self-aware. When a computer says, "I want to own New York," it must know the meaning of "I". Perhaps this is contradicted by animal behavior. Even primitive worms and insects know what they want, yet there is no evidence that they are self-aware or that they have free will. A computer operating system has a data block describing the processor type, size of memory, disk capacity, etc. If asked to load a program that requires more memory than the system has, it will say, "I do not have enough memory." It keeps accurate time, responds only to the person who gives the right name and password, and knows what printers, disk drives, and tape machines are connected. Perhaps some steps are being taken toward the goal. It is hard to specify just how much one must know about oneself to be self-aware.

Certainly computer programs that play chess seem goal-directed to checkmate their opponent, but they are quite unaware of their own existence. They do not have the option of changing the goal they seek--choosing to quit playing the silly game for instance (although many will resign when they are badly beaten). Some are programmed to make sarcastic remarks, or pretend arrogance or humility, but obviously it is either deterministic or random. We just do not know how to program computers to be self-aware and make real choices the way God did when He made people.

"Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator--individuality, power to think and to do." [*Education* p. 17]

So far we have not copied God's power far enough to create a machine that also has free will. Occasionally we may wish that our children *did not* have free will, but as you think about it, that would not be very satisfying.

An interesting science fiction book tells of a scientist who wanted to make robots who could make moral choices. What better test than to put the robot on a small raft, only buoyant enough to support one, with another robot or a human. In the first test, Samaritan I is tested with a human and, after determining that the human is smarter, Samaritan I wobbles over the side into the water. Two Samaritan II's both jump overboard, two Samaritan III's each try to throw the other overboard and the Samaritan IV's go down while clutching each others electronic throats.

[*The Tin Men* by Michael Frayn, copyright 1965]

Epicurus says of the happy man,

He "has no belief in necessity, which is set up by some [the Stoics] as the mistress of all things, but he refers some things to fortune, some to ourselves; because necessity is an irresponsible power, and because he sees that fortune is unstable, while our own will is free; and this freedom constitutes, in our case, a responsibility which makes us encounter blame and praise. [Horne, *Free Will and Human Responsibility*, p. 26]

Necessity is determinism and fortune is randomness or luck. The rest of this paper will ignore randomness and focus on refuting arguments against free will, followed by discussion of the use of the will in overcoming sin.

**Arguments against Free Will****I. We are Heredity plus Environment, and Nothing More.**

Clarence Darrow in *Attorney for the Damned* makes several arguments that we do *not* have free will and are not responsible for our actions. He says that everything we do is the result of heredity or environment and since we cannot control either one, we have no free will. Even criminal behavior, he argues, is controlled by outside factors.

Using statistics, he shows that crime increases during times of economic hardship. Hence he concludes that if we could have universal prosperity, there would be no crime--except for those few individuals who have broken minds and should be treated kindly in a hospital. However, the history of horrible deeds done by those who were rich (and not insane) seems to deny his thesis. Kings, churchmen, and industrialists have all been oppressors. The major problem here is that Darrow is taking the results of a large class and applying them to individuals.

If we conclude that mankind is deterministic, unable to go beyond heredity and environment in moral choices, then it seems that the same would be true of technical achievements--humans could not be inventive. The ability to imagine things that never have been (the tractor, airplane, rocket ship, etc.) and then make them, shows that we can and do go beyond heredity and environment. Computers have become a tool of the imagination in which we construct fantastic games

and alien environments that certainly go beyond anything seen by us or our ancestors. We have the ability to originate ideas that came from no other source. (This is the problem with a literary criticism that is often applied to inspired writings: it is assumed that anything an author wrote came from some other human source. If a similar thought can be found in any material that the author might have seen, inspiration's claim that God gave the thoughts is denied.)

Our ability to go beyond our heredity and environment in technical and artistic lines makes a good argument that we can also go beyond in moral lines--either good or bad. One could ask where Nero, Hitler, or Stalin learned their cruel ways. One could ask who was the model for Albert Schweitzer, George Muller, Moses, John the Baptist, Paul, or John the Beloved.

I will allow that heredity ("unto the 3rd and 4th generation" Ex. 20:5) and environment ("can any good thing come out of Nazareth" John 1:46) do play a part in our moral choices but that they do not *force* our choices. Those who are born to addicted parents will have a very hard time being temperate, those who are raised in an abusive home will have a more difficult time learning to love. Yet, God's grace is sufficient to rescue even these, if they respond to His call. "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." Heb. 7:25

"God has not left us to battle with evil in our own finite strength. Whatever may be our inherited or cultivated tendencies to wrong, we can overcome through the power that He is ready to impart." [*Ministry of Healing* p 175-176]

**II. The Brain is Electrochemical and Must be Deterministic.**

Bertrand Russell argues against the existence of free will from another angle. Since the mind operates on chemical and electrical energy; and since given any such device with full knowledge of its present state, its next state can be predicted: the will must be deterministic, not free. Thus he disposes of sin, since sin must be a condition of will that is uncaused. He goes on to claim that this thought caused France to endorse pure materialism and thus brought on the French Revolution. [*Religion and Science* p. 122-127]

This argument is like the argument against a computer's having free will because of its design. Before Einstein and Heisenberg it was a real puzzler. But as physics has come to recognize it is impossible to know both the position and speed of an object at the same time, the matter of determinism is no longer absolute. [Freeman J. Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions: An Exploration of Science and Belief*] The work done with neural networks by computer scientists shows that the present computer programming model is not the only way machines can work. Neural networks of very small size can perform difficult tasks like converting text to spoken words or locating defective products on an assembly line, using a video camera. When we consider that the human brain has 14 billion neurons with up to 10,000 inputs to each one, it is foolhardy to say what it is incapable of doing! God at the Tower of Babel said, "...and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do." [Gen. 11:6]



In another place Bertrand Russell praises "free thinkers" like Thomas Paine, Robert Owen, and Karl Marx. [*Understanding History* p. 68. p.56-122 discuss free will] The idea of a "free thinker" without free will is certainly contradictory!

### III. God's Sovereign Will Precludes our having Free Will.

Wycliffe, Calvin, and Martin Luther all claimed that we do not have free will. Luther, from his strong position on sovereign grace and salvation by faith alone, was not willing to allow the human will *any* role in salvation. He claimed that:

"God foreknows nothing contingently, but that He foresees, purposes and does all things according to His immutable, eternal and infallible will. This thunderbolt throws free will flat and utterly dashes it to pieces." [*Discourse on Free Will*, Erasmus-Luther p. 106]

Erasmus argued that if there is no free will, then God is the author of sin--both in people and the devil. Moreover, God would not be just in punishing us for actions over which we had no control--except in the sense that the Creator can do anything He wants with anything He creates. Luther believes Paul who says, "I know that in me dwells no good thing." [Rom. 7:18] But he does not apply Gen. 3:15 where God promises enmity between all Eve's children and the devil, which is the basis of free will for fallen man. Nor does he look at I Cor. 10:13 which promises that with any temptation God allows to come to us, He also gives us a way of escape. The question is not whether we have free will *independent* of God, but rather do we have free will *given* by God.

Quoting Luther again,

"Thus the human will is like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes whence God wills;....If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, nor which it will seek. But the riders themselves contend who shall have and hold it." [*Discourse on Free Will*, Erasmus-Luther p. 112]

This would seem to give God full control, since God's power is greater than Satan's and He is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." [II Peter 3:9] Thus, everyone should be saved. Anyone who is lost could say that it was because God did not fight the devil hard enough on his behalf. But as Ellen White writes,

"We do not understand as we should the great conflict going on between invisible agencies, the controversy between loyal and disloyal angels. Over every man, good and evil angels strive. This is no make-believe conflict. It is not mimic battles in which we are engaged. We have to meet the most powerful adversaries, and it rests with us to determine which shall win." [*Testimonies for the Church Vol. 7 p. 213*]

Ellen White says that we *can* choose who will control our will. [Also of interest are: Eze. 33:11, Eccl. 11:9, Matt. 11:28; 23:37, James 1:13-15, II Pet. 1:10, & I Cor. 9:24.] The question is not whether or not God can do as He wishes, but rather, whether He wishes to give us free will. Our choice is contingent upon God's desire to give us a choice.

#### **(An historical aside**

Just as Luther contended with Erasmus, St. Thomas with Duns Scotus, and St. Augustine with Pelagius; so Calvin was met by Jacob Harmensen, a Dutch theologian who Latinized his name to Arminius. His views have survived better than most of the others and include two in particular that apply here: 1) that man may resist divine grace and 2) that man may fall from grace. This doctrine became known as Arminianism and has entered the Church of England and Methodism.

Descartes recognized free will but called it the parent of error; his successor, Malebranche believed in it but considered it a defect. Kant felt that freedom is a postulate of a moral life--if there are things that a man should do, then it must be possible to do them. He said, "Man ought, therefore he can." [Horne p. 52-53] )

Gary Friesen in, *Decision Making & the Will of God* says,

"The world was created by His will and our salvation is the result of God working all things after the counsel of His sovereign will. He even determines each toss of the dice in a Monopoly game. No one or no thing can resist or frustrate His sovereign will. It will inevitably come to pass.

And yet, though God determines all things, He does so without being the author of sin, without violating the will of man, and without destroying the reality of decision making. Each one of us is held responsible for every decision we make. This is a great mystery, but it is true. If we are not able to grasp it, we may rest assured that it all fits together perfectly in the mind of God."

I agree that if you take his view, there are some unexplainable mysteries--even contradictions. If you take this just a little further, you will have God controlling all the thoughts in the devil's mind. It seems that God did control the casting of lots, at least in the case of Achan [Joshua 7] and Jonah, but I do not think He controls all the dice in Las Vegas, although He could if He wanted to.

Some have wondered if God's setting up of kings [Dan. 4:35] implies that He forces the will of all the voters in today's democratic elections? Surely He controls those wills that are submitted to His control but does He overrule the will of the rebellious? Does God stuff the ballot box? The candidate of God's choice may not get elected but God's plan in the world will still be carried out. Did God want Iraq to invade Kuwait? I think not. It was the wrath (or greed) of

man, but even that praises God. [Psalm 76:10, see also James 1:20] God allowed the invasion and may have used it for a purpose (No speculation here about what that purpose might have been).

"In the annals of human history, the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as if dependent on the will and prowess of man; the shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, above, behind, and through all the play and counterplay of human interest and power and passions, the agencies of the All-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will." [*Prophets and Kings* p. 499-500]

But surely Judas had to betray Christ? I think not, but rather as Christ said, "The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born." [Matt. 26:24] Even if God needs a *terrible* deed done, that need does not excuse the one who does it. In the Bible God spoke of a heathen nation being used to punish idolatrous Judah but later being punished themselves for their pride. [Isa. 10:5-15] Pharaoh was warned that his very rebellion was being used by God to show His power [Ex. 9:16]

In His interaction with us, God holds us responsible for our actions. In ancient Israel a murderer was to be killed [Num. 35:16-18; 31]. A thief was to restore double [Ex. 22:3]. Saul was punished for not fulfilling God's order completely [I Sam. 15]. David was punished for his affair with Bathsheba and Uriah [II Sam. 11]. Nowhere in Scripture does God excuse sin. He always assumes that we are responsible moral agents and the question "What hast thou done?" [Gen. 4:10, I Sam. 13:11] is addressed to sinners.

God's sovereign will is revealed in Christ, "The love of Christ constraineth us;..." [II Cor. 5:13]

God does not force us but loves us. "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" [Rom. 2:4]

Christ, in the Lord's Prayer, taught us to pray "Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven."

[Matt. 6:10, Luke 11:2] Why should we pray that God's will be done if there is no other option?

Christ in the garden prayed, "...not my will, but thine, be done." [Luke 22:42] Thus He asserted the existence of His Own will by His choice to submit it to His Father's will (see also John 10:15-18).

If there is divine election, it is at our option for we are told, "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if you do these things, ye shall never fall.

[II Peter 1:8]

**IV. God's Foreknowledge Forces us to do what He *Knows* we will do.**

In Greek mythology, there was a god who could predict the future. One of the lesser gods came and asked what his fate would be. He was told that he would die as a despised and poor creature in a certain city. He begged the god to change his fortune but was told, "I would love to give a happier picture. But, I do not control the future. I only tell what will be. I despise inaccuracy and lies."

Foreknowledge is like a man on a hill top watching two trains approaching each other around a bend, he may *know* that the trains will crash but his foreknowledge did not *cause* the crash.

Of course in God's case, He not only knows the future but can control it too. Even I can predict with good accuracy the things that I control. That is why I claim that this section and the previous are so similar. First we saw that God's sovereign will does not preclude our having free will, then separately we see that neither does His foreknowledge.

In oriental countries when a youth on the street is asked, "Why are you not in school?" he may reply, "It is not the will of Allah. If Allah wanted me in school, would I not be there?" This passive acceptance of determinism based on God's sovereignty prevents people's advancement. The person who believes in free will believes that he can and should *make* things happen. Belief

in free will results in a better state of society than belief in determinism--no matter which view is really correct.

We are forced to conclude that we can choose whether to believe in free will or determinism: a choice that will change the way we live--thus we must have free will.

### **Man can Cooperate with God to Overcome Sin**

Frank Channing Haddock, in his book *Power of Will* published in 1921, gives directions for overcoming many types of bad habits by "proper" use of the will. This is an area of great interest to Seventh-day Adventists. Following are quotations from Ellen White that are so clear as hardly to need further comment.

"While our salvation is wholly dependent upon Jesus, we have a work to do in order that we may be saved. The apostle says, 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.' The work that we are to do is not independent of what God is to do, but a work of co-operation with God. The power and the grace of God are to be wrought into the heart by the divine worker; but some go astray here, claiming that man has a work to do that is wholly independent of any work of God. Another class take the other extreme, and say that man is free from all obligations because God does the whole work, both the willing and the doing. But the true ground to take is that the human will must be brought into subjection to the divine will. The will of man is not to be forced into co-operation with divine agencies, but must be voluntarily submitted. Man has no power of himself to work out his own salvation.

"Salvation must be the result of cooperation with divine power, and God will not do that for man which he can do for himself. Man is wholly dependent upon the grace of Christ. He has no power to move one step in the direction of Christ only as the Spirit of God draws him. The holy Spirit is continually drawing the soul, and will continue to draw, until by persistent refusal, the sinner grieves away the tender messenger of God." ["Bible Echo and Signs of the Times", 11/01/1893, Cooperation with God a Necessity; EGW Database #114652]

The paragraph above seems to echo Luther's statement that man is powerless. This is true unless the Holy Spirit draws us, and He draws everyone.

"Through yielding to sin, man placed his will under the control of Satan. He became a helpless captive in the tempter's power. God sent His Son into our world to break the power of Satan, and to emancipate the will of man....When man places himself under the control of God, the will becomes firm and strong to do right, the heart is cleansed from selfishness and filled with Christ-like love. The mind yields to the authority of the law of love, and every thought is brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ." [*Our High Calling*, p. 104; EGW Database #49169]

"The will of every human being should be under the discipline and control of God, for it is a dangerous element if exercised in selfish schemes. ....The will of man is safe only when united with the will of God. When merged into the will of God it is a will joined to conscience, rightly exercised in advancing the honor and glory of God....Under the supervision of the divine power, the will is to be cultivated to become strong, prompt, firm. ..." ["Bible Echo and Signs of the Times" 07/20/1896; EGW Database #115111]

"...It is the work of the human agent to co-operate with divine agencies. As soon as we incline our will to harmonize with God's will, the grace of Christ is supplied to co-operate with our resolve. But it is not to be a substitute to do our work--to work in spite of our resolutions and actions. Therefore our success in the Christian life will not be because of the abundance of light and evidence, but will depend upon our acceptance of the light given, upon our rousing the energies, upon our acknowledging the light, and upon our co-operating with the heavenly ministers appointed of God to work for the salvation of the soul." ["Bible Echo and Signs of the Times" 11/01/1893; EGW Database #114656]



### Summary

We are free moral agents. God created us with free will in Eden and, after the fall, gave His Son to restore our freedom. He has always operated toward us on the basis that we can choose. Just how we make decisions is not fully understood--nor can we presently duplicate the process electronically--but the decisions we make are neither deterministic nor random but rather we consider options, deliberate, and select. God holds us accountable for how we have chosen. When God says, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" [Joshua 24:15] we can and must choose.

"...And, if we consent, He can and will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity with His will, that when obeying Him, we shall but carry out our own impulses. The will, refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service."  
["The Signs of the Times", 11/19/1896, The Love of God; EGW Database #159331]

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live:" [Deut. 30:19]

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